The White King's Dream

by Elizabeth A. Lynn

The straps across her shoulders were cutting through the thin cloth gown. I'm cold, she thought. "Okay, Louise, time to wake up now," said a voice warm as honey—but I am awake, Luisa thought, and wondered why she could not see the light that she could feel falling on her eyes.

"Baby, I'll move you into the sun while I change those dirty sheets. You messed the bed again, Louise. I know you can't help it, but I sure wish you wouldn't do it." At least I can hear, Luisa thought. She heard the voice, and a crying sound, quite close. The sheets were clammy under her. She smelled a stale and sour smell. The straps fell away. Something lifted her.

She was afraid.

She was set in a hard chair. The straps came back. The chair was metal and cold. Now she was sitting in the sunlight. She wanted to say *thank you* but her mouth would not move. The close crying sound increased. It was herself; she was crying. The stale sour scent was her own. Helen. Day shift. Every day began like this, except the days when it rained. Helen still came, then, to change her bedclothes, wash her, feed her, shove pills down her shriveled throat; but there was no sunlight to sit in when it rained, and they would never open the windows so that she could smell the rain. All she smelled was her own melting flesh. In Lord Byron there was a fat man crying to get out, and in me there is a skeleton wailing for release.

"Baby, why you screwing up your face like that? Are you too hot?" No, Luisa wanted to scream, no, but Helen's inexorable hands pulled her out of the warmth and dumped her into her cold, barren bed. "Breakfast in a while, Louise. You just put your head back into the pillow and dream, now."

Even dreams are dreams, Luisa thought. *Y los sueños, sueños son.* Dreams no longer meant sleep, and what good was sleep when she had to wake from it again? Sleep just meant the night shift, and then the day shift, the sun looking through the windows, *busy old fool, unruly sun.* Breakfast, she thought with loathing. They fed her with a tube down her throat. Sometimes they put a tube like an arm into her and pumped air through her, making her breathe. She hated tubes. Is that Freudian, she wondered, to hate tubes? She wanted to be back in the sunlight, in the warm. She began to cry again, a cat-mewl of sound. Helen might hear it; Helen listened, sometimes, and might understand; and might put her back into the sun.

. . . . .

"They just like babies," Helen said. "They're over ninety, most of them, and they can't hardly talk, but they can cry. If you watch their eyes you can figure out what it is they want—I can, anyways. You'll get the hang of it."

I don't give a damn, thought Mark Wald. But he nodded. The odors of feces and ammonia fought in the halls. He hated the geriatrics homes, but it was the only place he could get work anymore; the hospitals wouldn't hire him. The best thing about this place is that the lockers are in the basement and I can go down there to do my drinking in private, the way a man should drink. Unhurried snorts. He would read—he had the latest paperback thriller in his locker now—and drink, slowly, decently. No one would notice on the graveyard shift. During the day there were five aides, three orderlies, two RNs on duty. Graveyard shift there were two orderlies, two aides, one RN, no baths to give or beds to make or people to feed. Stay up all night riding herd on a bunch of whimpering zombies—then go home and sleep till way past noon. Helen was still talking about the patients as if it mattered what they had once done or been. They were zombies now. This one had been a doctor. This one a lawyer. He pretended to listen as she stuck her head into every room.

"Honey, what is it?"

The old lady in the bed had a blind, wrinkled face like a sun-struck turtle. She whimpered. "You wet? No, you not wet. Straps too tight?" She loosened the posey straps that held the thin gawk of a woman in bed. "This is Louise; she was a teacher in a college." The sounds went on. Helen laid a broad black hand on the woman's forehead and reached for her pulse with the other. "Your pulse's okay. You cold? I could put you back in the sun."

The crying stopped.

"That's it, right? Okay, baby, we'll put you in the chair. This is Mark, here, he's a new night shift worker." She was taking off the cloth restraints as she talked. Mark pulled the wheelchair over to the bed. Together they let down the high sides of the bed, helped Luisa to a sitting position, picked her up, and put her in the chair. Her long fingernails scratched lightly against Mark's neck. He shuddered.

I won't get old, he thought. Blind, half-dead, a piece of meat in a bed for others to haul around. I'll die decently. Pills, or gas, or maybe I'll jump off the bridge. The alcohol will do it for me. He saw himself in an alcoholic stupor, staggering along the road … getting hit by a car and dying instantly, no pain, no bedpans or tubes up his arms and in his ass and down his throat.

It was an old vision. Usually it waited till he was decently asleep. It was always night or early morning in the dream, and the car was always a red car. "Excuse me," he said to Helen. He ran downstairs. Let her think he had to piss. He twirled the dial of the combination lock on his locker, got it wrong, did it again, got it right, uncapped the bottle, and took a swallow. The bourbon eased down warmly—that was better. Sometimes he felt it was the only warm thing in the world. He screwed the cap on the bottle, locked it up, and sauntered up the stairs. They would know, of course. That Helen would smell it on him. What the hell, they wouldn't fire him unless he made a mistake. He wouldn't make a mistake.

Helen was waiting for him at the nursing station. "Let's hope he doesn't end up like Harold," he heard her say. Who the hell was Harold? The nurse at the desk was old and stringy, on her way to looking like that senile crock down the hall.

"Hi," he said, smiling. "I'm Mark Wald, the new night shift orderly."

. . . . .

Graveyard shift was a breeze. The old crocks wheezed and cried and slept. The aides took turns sleeping in the bed in the back room. Mark read paperbacks and sucked on his bottle of bourbon. The other night orderly was an old fag named Morton. He liked playing cards. Mark preferred to read. Morton sulked and played solitaire at the nursing station desk.

"Who was Harold?"

Morton looked up from putting a red queen on a black king. "Oh, it's you."

"Who the hell else would it be?"

"Harold was the dude before you. Black and built. Younger than you."

"He was a fag, too?"

"The word is faggot, sweetie. No. Straight as they come, if you'll excuse the phrase."

"What happened to him—he get tired of this dump?"

Morton looked up again. "No, sweetie. He ripped off dope from the narcotics box and OD'd on it. Morphine, I think."

Now why should that Helen even think he would be like some blood who needled himself to death? He hated drugs.

"Su-i-cide, they called it," said Morton.

"Huh."

"They come and go. I've been working here five years, you know that? Only Helen's been here longer than I have." His hands kept placing the cards. He had soft, pudgy hands.

"Helen said this place is a rich people's dump."

"It is. Look at the equipment we got! Monitors, crash carts. Those things are for hospitals. The nurses all have standing orders, so that if someone goes Code Red they can give the drugs without calling the doctor on the phone. Ever try to find a doctor at dinnertime? Forget it. All these old bags have money, and their sons and daughters have guilt complexes waiting for them to die."

"It's still a dump," Mark said. His knee brushed the table and all the cards slewed sideways off their piles. "Sorry."

Morton bent down. "Sure you are, sweetie," he said. "Sure you are."

Mark went down to his locker again. He sat with the bottle in his hand. The basement walls were dirty gray and nubby, like the stubble of old men's beards. He checked his watch. Near 4 A.M., time for somebody to die. It was true they often died at 4 A.M. They had had one respiratory failure that night already, the old lady in 209. Maybe she would die.

As if his thought had done it, a blinker over the basement door started flashing frantic red. Code Red, cardiac arrest. He stuck the bottle in the locker hastily and went up the stairs.

When he got to the room they were all in there. The EKG was jumping like a scalded mouse and the nurse was using the defibrillator. They all stood clear of the metal bedframe. The body on the bed jerked. Damn, Mark thought, in a nursing home they were supposed to let you die in peace.

"Call St. Francis's admitting," the RN said. "This one has to be in CCU."

Morton went to do that. Waste of time and money, Mark thought. Why can't they just let the bastards die?

. . . . .

It is a sophism to imagine that there is any strict dividing line between the waking world and the world of dreams. Prospero's Cell, by Lawrence Durrell, Luisa thought. Today she was feeling strong, almost strong enough to tongue the respirator tube out of her throat. They would never let her do that. She had been to Greece, though not to Durrell's Corcyra. *Somewhere between Calabria and Corfu the blue really begins.* That was the book's first line. She tried to remember the blue and white, all the colors, the scent of lemon trees … "Hi, baby. They told us at report you had a bad night! What'd you want to stop breathing for, huh? You know they won't let you do that around here." Helen was moving closer to the bed. "It was busy here last night. That Friedman in 211, he arrested last night. They took him to St. Francis."

Yes, Luisa thought, *oh yes?*

Helen's voice was gentle as a kiss. "They called this morning to say he passed, baby." She went on. "Your son's coming in to see you today, baby; won't that be nice? He called to say he be in after lunch."

Johnny—she recalled a little boy named Johnny, who did not at all go with the man-sized voice that sometimes came and talked over her. Be nice, Johnny. She had often had to tell him that, a cranky little boy who liked to fuss … What could she tell him today? That they fed her through a tube and that she could no longer breathe through her own power? That food has no taste when it goes through a tube? That the sea around Greece is blue? How had she borne such an unimaginative child! He had sent her a postcard from Europe, where he had dutifully gone to honeymoon: a picture of the Paris Metro, a giant pneumatic tube. Tubes. Could she tell him she was sick of tubes?

Helen was talking to her. "Baby? Louise? Oh, damn." She half-felt hands on her. I can hear you perfectly, Luisa wanted to say. But Helen was muttering off to the nursing station. Luisa was walking the line between wakefulness and dreams, that was all. She imagined it as a thin line cut in concrete, like the lines in the sidewalks she had skipped over as a child, chanting. "Step on a crack, break your mother's back." If only they would stop pulling her back into life. Even Helen, who understood, who always told her when one of them had gone, even Helen held her to life. One day through the tubes they would feed her arsenic, and then it would all be over.

Fantasy. She built against the dark of her closed eyes the trembling blues of Corfu.

. . . . .

At six o'clock Mark made his final rounds. The fluorescent lights were watery in the dawn. Out of the beds the old people stared, sleepy, flat-eyed, blind-eyed. He was alone. Morton was in the hospital, St. Francis, cut up by a mugger, rolled on his way to work, left to bleed to death in an alley. What had he gone into an alley for? *Su-i-cide;* he could hear Morton saying it in that fag drawl.

Someone was moaning. He walked into 209. The old lady was shifting and turning her head. The tape that held the respirator tube was loose. She was supposed to be comatose, or semicomatose. He watched her for a while. The movement looked purposeful. He reached out and patted the tape down again. She moaned. Her eyes were cloudy, and he remembered that she was blind. How did it feel to have hands come out of the night at you like that? Like the hands with the knife that had cut Morton. "Listen, sweetie," he said, "you want me to take that tape off? That tube out? If I do that you'll die, you know, poof, out like a damned light. You know that?" Her body was still, frozen, stiff as a board. He put his hand on the tape again to tease her. Comatose, semicomatose, what did doctors know? he thought. She'd heard him. I'd be scared; Christ, I'd be petrified. "I won't do it," he told her. "I could lose my job."

He drowsed through the report that ritualized the shift change and then went downstairs to collect his book and his bottle. He leaned against the dirty gray wall and took a long drink. Warmer than any woman. One for the road. And one for Morton. He wondered how bad Morton was. He capped the bottle and tucked it, brownbagged, decently clad, under his arm. He wondered what Morton had left uncollected in his locker. A pack of cards?

The wind was bitter. He held tightly to the bottle, glad that his was only a short walk home. It came to him suddenly that he was drinking himself to death. The thought was mildly entertaining. It could be worse. On the ice patches he staggered, and it became a game to see if this one or the next one would trip him. He beat them all. He decided to shortcut through the tunnel under the freeway. There would be few cars through it on a Sunday morning, 7 A.M. on an icy day. The tunnel walls were gray and smooth. He found himself thinking back to 209. He had almost done it to the old lady. Christ. That would have been a mistake.

The car came diving into the neck of the tunnel, a bullet-shaped red toy. Mark watched as it slipped on the street ice. The driver took the skids, slid, and then pulled out, nonchalant as if it were a game for kids. Smooth, he thought.

The car grew suddenly very large and very red.

The dream, he thought, it's the car of the dream. The tunnel wall was flat and cold at his back. He was pressed down and there was nowhere he could go. The bright fender grazed him, and like a bull, the car was gone. The driver honked back at him. Bastard, you missed me, he thought, you missed me! Torn between rage and joy, he threw the bottle into the air. It went up like a rocket. His feet slipped out from under him. "Hey!" He was falling. You bastard, he thought in wonderment as the bottle shattered all around him, you bastard.

. . . . .

"Morning, baby. You doing any better today? It's raining. Gray outside. I almost didn't want to come to work this morning, it's so ugly. But then I thought, what would Louise think if I weren't there? She'd

worry. Honey, you remember that night orderly Mark?" Helen's voice dropped. "You know, they found him under the freeway this morning with his neck broke, and all cut up and covered with whiskey. An accident. Isn't that something? He was young, too. But Morton, you remember Morton, he's okay and coming back to work tonight, so there'll be someone on duty to look after you. Imagine, he just slipped on the ice! Cruel way to die."

Luisa dreamed. Cruel. That was cruel. *April is the cruellest month, breeding lilacs out of the dead earth* … Lord, must these bones live? The tube in her chest pumped. Her mouth hurt, her back hurt. Mark, she thought, remembering his voice and the thick alcoholic breath of him and the feel of his hand on her cheek. It was cruel of him to tease me. Out like a light, he had said. *Out, out, brief candle.* The light in Greece stains the air like yellow wine. Why would they not let her go? Arsenic through the tube would be easy. That would be murder; they would never do that. She lay and dreamed of all the ways there were to die. Arsenic, gas, ropes and cliffs, the white cliffs of Dover, steely razor blades with blue edges, blue water to drown in, and cars, bright red lethal cars. So many ways to die, she thought, but not here, and her heart clenched in a sudden fury. Again, she urged it, again, again. They do it for each other, but not for us, the bastards, never for us.

The End

First published in *Shadows 2* edited by Charles L. Grant.